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# Finding Meaning in the Two-Finger Banjo Style.

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# **Finding Meaning in the Two-Finger Banjo Style**

Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for Honors

By

Jeffrey Kent Elkins  
Midway Honors Scholar  
Bluegrass, Country and Old Time Music Studies

To

The Honors College  
East Tennessee State University  
April 30, 2013

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Jeffrey Elkins

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Lee Bidgood, Faculty Advisor



## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements.....	v
Vitae.....	vii
Publications and Presentations.....	viii
Introduction & Methods.....	1
The Banjo in America.....	5
Which Two Fingers?.....	9
Whose Two Fingers? .....	11
Personal Reflection.....	21
The Art of Music.....	29
Works Cited.....	33
Resources .....	37

## **Table of Images & Figures**

Image 1. Bill Birchfield.....	13
Image 2. Dobson Matchless Banjo.....	20
Figure 1. Traditional Notation.....	23
Figure 2. Tablature.....	24



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The following amazing and experienced musicians provided a wealth of information on old time music and two-finger banjo style in informal discussion, jam sessions, recording sessions, and lessons, and I am in their debt: Ben Bateson, Gail Gillespie, Dr. Richard Blaustein, and Joseph Decosimo. Thanks to their tutelage and the wonderful folks online at Banjo Hangout, I was brought up-to-speed quickly on the art and science of the style, revivalism in old time music, and other topics. Thanks, too, to Roy Andrade and Dr. Ted Olson for reading and providing valuable critique of my dissertation.

I dedicate this paper to the memory of Mr. Ed Teague, a two-finger banjo player from northern Georgia. I had a lovely conversation one afternoon in the summer of 2012 with Ed and his wife Hazel, and I'll never forget their grace and generosity.

The two-finger banjo style languishes as a small footnote in the lexicon of old time banjo music—very important to a passionate (and lucky!) few, but not known by too many others. My research inspired my individual development of this wonderful style, as well as increased participation in the community of two-finger players and old time music; however, this thesis is only a starting point to understanding the meaning of two-finger banjo.



## **Vitae**

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## Publications and Presentations

- Elkins, Jeff. 2012. "Two-Finger Banjo Recording Project," Paper presented at the 2012 Tennessee Collegiate Honors Conference in Nashville, Tennessee.
- \_\_\_\_\_, producer, performer. 2012. *The Great Smoky Mountain Bluegrass Band*. Commercial release recorded and produced in the studios at East Tennessee State University. The Great Smoky Mountain Bluegrass Band. CD.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. "Two-Finger Banjo: A Discussion and Demonstration," Paper presented at the 2013 Appalachian Studies Association Conference in Boone, North Carolina.
- \_\_\_\_\_, producer, performer. 2013. *Breaker Boys*. Original composition performed and recorded in partial fulfillment of Bachelor of Arts degree in Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies at East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee. CD.
- \_\_\_\_\_, producer, performer. 2013. *Wilma Lee's Waltz*. Composition by Richard A. Hood performed and recorded in partial fulfillment of Bachelor of Arts degree in Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies at East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee. CD.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. "Two-Finger Banjo Research," Moderated forum discussion on Banjo Hangout, February 20, 2013. Web.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. "The Art of Two-Finger Banjo," Paper presented at the 2013 Boland Symposium for Undergraduate Research in Johnson City, TN.
- \_\_\_\_\_, editor. 2011. "Surviving and Thriving in College," Colloquium class project by *Over One Hundred and Fifty College Students*, Johnson City, TN.

## Introduction & Methods

Any research project begins with a goal of solving a problem, answering a question, or documenting something noteworthy. My research began with the goal of field-recording players of traditional Appalachian music. I narrowed my focus to two-finger banjo, a playing style I first heard in 2010, but my fieldwork efforts raised many questions. The first, and most obvious, was what *is* two-finger style? Second, as I looked for the roots of the style, I discovered that not only is there little documentation on two-finger banjo, but most of the players who can be considered primary sources—those that are self taught, or who learned strictly through an oral tradition—are no longer alive. I wondered why more people weren't researching, writing about, and playing this way. Finally, I discovered that, compared to other banjo styles, two-finger style is rarely performed today, and there is a dearth of current written or recorded works. Neither commercialization nor commoditization of two-finger banjo seem to be strong avenues of opportunity, so two-finger players rarely approached this banjo style with the intent to make a lot of money from professional performance or media sales. Why is it played today?

In a series of lectures delivered at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, folklorist Arthur Palmer Hudson described growing up in the south, and talked about watching African American children, descendents of slaves, make cane flutes and pipes out of reeds. He witnessed their craftwork (which was performed independent of instruction by adults), as well as their subsequent performance on the flutes, and asked, "Where and how did these Negro boys learn to make and play flutes and pipes? Had the instruments and the art of playing them been imported from Africa [by ancestors] or by ... grandfathers/great-grandfathers? How far back in American history do the records go of cane-flute playing by Negroes or by anybody else?" (11) These were also my questions about two-finger banjo.

Two-finger banjo is a playing style dating back many generations, and there are related stringed-instrument techniques which can be found on several continents. Also known as thumb-led or finger-led banjo, this style of playing is relatively obscure when considering all styles of banjo, and, in America, is connected to the “old time” tradition, and primarily found in Appalachia. Self-taught performers can still be found, though most first generation (self-taught) and many second generation (learned from an ancestor) players have been gone for many years. Several well-known performers, such as Will Keys (d. 2005), Wade Mainer (d. 2011), and Ed Teague (d. 2013) passed away within the last eight years. It is becoming less likely to find a first generation two-finger player.

My goal of recording players became a component in the larger picture, however; I decided that it was not enough to record the style, and I undertook the task of researching the roots and development of the style. I chose to address the questions of who and why by identifying performers and scholars and listening to their recordings; researching links between the style and other styles, as well as the links to the region; and learning to play the style myself. These areas comprise the components that would lead to a better understanding of its origins and obscurity, as well as where it fits into today’s lexicon of banjo and old-time performance.

Banjo players and non-musicians alike should be able to identify characteristics and definitions with the aid of musical notation and tablature I include in this document; however, like much music, often demonstrations are required—publishing research *about* music *without* music is fairly disingenuous. I encourage further investigation of recorded two-finger banjo music, videos, and the performers themselves to gain a better understanding and appreciation of this style of music. A list of resources is available at the end of this paper.

While attempting to define two-finger banjo playing, review its application and incidence, identify well-known practitioners and types of players and performers, and place it in historical and musical context with other banjo playing styles, I was inspired by Jeff Titon's essay on bi-musicality, wherein he writes that researchers must "go beyond mere tune analysis and cultural history" (20); I have opted to present the information a narrative style, a documentation model<sup>1</sup> which focuses more on description than analysis (Stone 3), because as I began to gain understandings about two-finger banjo, I also began to understand what inspires individual performers to study, explore, and, indeed, revive styles of music that are obscure or esoteric. Further, I found my general exploration into the literature about the banjo in Appalachia, and specific inquiry into the two-finger style revealed a scarcity of documentation, which required working with many secondary sources. Finally, I uncovered a few dubious credibility claims made by regional historians and banjo players—it became my experience that many who are associated with traditional music have strongly held beliefs, and they often contradict one another, especially when documentation is thin. I didn't want to get this wrong; as cultural researcher Clifford Geertz warns, "Ethnographers need to convince us ... not merely that they themselves have truly been there, but ... that had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded" (5). So my investigation turned inward; my conclusions come as much from what I discovered with the banjo in my hands as they do from research.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Stone, narrative historiography includes chronological organization of a single coherent story, is concerned with people not abstract circumstances, deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical, and leans heavily toward description versus analysis.

In defense of any indictment of colloquial beliefs, I can only quote Geertz and note: this study of two-finger banjo “is not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5).

## **The Banjo in America**

Much has been written by scholars Dena Epstein, Karen Linn, and others about the development of the banjo, including its roots in West African gourd instruments with names like kora and banjar. The arrival and development of these instruments into the 5-stringed instrument we know today is not the subject of this research, but some discussion of the early banjo music and influences in Appalachia is necessary for context. Banjo playing was part of early minstrel shows in the 1800's, was played by African-Americans on southern plantations, and became adopted across the early states as both a folk and parlor instrument. Dock Boggs, a well-known old time banjo player from Virginia, learned to play finger-style banjo from watching a dance band in Norton. Although primarily known for his unique three-finger style, Dock Boggs combined a thumb led, two-finger techniques with up-picking, often blending styles to serve his songs (Lightfoot 173). In the liner notes to a Folkways release in 1983, Barry O'Connell writes:

Boggs ... [learned] his finger-picking banjo style from an African-American man. When he was twelve years old and already working full-time in the mines around Norton, Boggs attended a dance in Dorchester, a mostly black coal town. The all-black band consisted of a fiddler, a guitarist, a mandolin player, and most striking to young Boggs, a banjoist. Dock was much impressed with the banjoist's finger-style technique. (5)

Robert Winans and Elias Kaufman identify the minstrel shows of the 1840s as the beginning of the banjo's widespread popularization in folk culture, especially among rural southerners (1). In addition to the minstrel shows, the availability of "primers" developed by and for banjo players also increased the popularity of the instrument, and they outlined two distinct

styles of banjo—clawhammer style (known as “strike” style in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and guitar or classic style, which was a finger-picking method of playing popular music—primarily parlor music—on the banjo. Well-known primers for playing the banjo include *Briggs Solo Banjo Method* from 1855 (MacKillop online) and Phil. Rice’s *Correct Method for the Banjo, with or without a Master* from 1858 (Winans 408).

Cecilia Conway identifies a basic timeline for the banjo’s growing popularity starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

[Before] 1800, banjo players had traveled across the mountain traces, reached Knoxville, and set frontier people to dancing. By 1810, the African banjer, with its short-drone thumb string and two or three other strings, was well known to white America. [By] 1855, an African-American two-finger picking style had been heard by whites and, by 1865, adopted. Although numerous variations in the technique evolved, the rhythmic sound of downstroking, two-finger picking, and thumb-lead banjo playing remained a recognizable and persistent pattern ... [the banjo was] the popular entertainment of minstrelsy. (156)

Another important factor contributed to the banjo’s popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—mass marketing and assembly-line building of affordable, if low-quality, instruments. In the latter half of the century a number of luthiers from Boston, Hartford, and New York became known by their advertisements, patents, and public discussions of the failings of their competitors’ instruments; names such as S. S. Stewart, James H. Buckbee, Robert McManus, and a family of five brothers, the Dobsons (Gura and Bollman 104-126). McManus, among others, was

interested in providing instruments at low cost, and streamlining the production process. Stewart, on the other hand, worked to increase the value of the workmanship, both in his factory and in the public eye, and strived to make the banjo a respected instrument of parlor and classical music.

The odds were stacked against him, however. Poor workmanship and cheap materials were the primary enemies Stewart perceived to his attempts to elevate the instrument in the public mind from minstrel show to parlor apparatus. George C. Dobson, like almost all of his four brothers, was both a maker of banjos and teacher of banjo music, and in 1874 he wrote a primer titled, *Simplified Method and Thorough School for the Banjo* based on a “new manner of instruction” that he had developed. This new method was the first documented banjo tablature—a notation method that displays the five strings of the banjo neck and indicates in what order the notes on the strings are to be played, along with indicating whether and where the string should be fretted. Dobson’s method, which was primarily finger-picking classic instruction but included other popular techniques, made learning the banjo much less time-consuming for those who, in his words, “have other duties that would preclude the possibility of their making a study of music” (Gura and Bollman 116). Despite the fact that Dobson also used traditional notation and provided advanced studies in the second half of his primer, Stewart felt strongly that this method reduced the image of the banjo and made it too accessible to players who would never master the instrument (because of lack of dedication to the art and craft). Dobson’s book remained popular for over two decades.

It is important to note that despite the primers, builders, and increasing number of teachers in New England, the classic style of playing was not the primary method of performance in Appalachia. Early descriptions of the minstrel music and even present-day identifications of



tunings and playing styles that have survived generations without classic codification very often don't show up in teaching methods from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Conway 154).

In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest in the banjo suddenly declined. Historians discuss several influences leading to this event, but Conway sums up the primary two factors that met at the exact right time to push the banjo to the background: the increased availability of both mail-order guitars and recorded music. She writes:

...record companies and radio stations showed little interest in the old-world ballads or old-time banjo playing ... In August 1927, after southern musicians had enjoyed access to inexpensive mail-order guitars for almost a generation, the Carter Family and the singing brakeman Jimmie Rodgers recorded ... in Bristol, Virginia.

Country music emerged, and the guitar took center stage. (149)

Despite the presence on those same recordings of banjo player B. F. Shelton, Conway is right that the guitar was taking center stage as "America's folk instrument." One consequence of this loss of popularity of the banjo in much of America was to isolate those who still played it. Due to a number of factors that included the Great Depression, the guitar was not as ubiquitous in Appalachia as record producers would have had us think, and strong oral and musical traditions in the mountains and rural south would, thankfully, keep the banjo styles of the region alive.

## **Which Two Fingers?**

Thumb-led banjo is a playing approach where the banjoist uses the thumb to play the melody of the tune (although it often serves double-duty and plays alternating 8<sup>th</sup> notes on the 5<sup>th</sup> string). This approach is often, though not always, characterized by the low pitch of the melody on the instrument. One example of a tune that can be played with a thumb led approach is Lazy John; the melody begins on the lowest note on the banjo (in standard tuning, the 4<sup>th</sup> string is D3, 146.8 Hz), and only climbs one octave. This leaves the 1<sup>st</sup> string (D4, 293.7 Hz) and 5<sup>th</sup> string (G4, 392 Hz) both open for counterpoint/rhythm picking.

Finger led banjo playing is opposite from thumb led—the melody is played by picking or plucking the strings with the forefinger. Melodies are generally in a higher register on finger led tunes and songs. One example of a finger-led song is “Uncle Will,” whose melody starts on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (D4), and which is transcribed later in this document.

Another technique used in two-finger, which I found in and around the Piedmont and west in North Carolina (Gillespie interview), is the use of the brush stroke—where the player sweeps the forefinger or ring finger away from (or sometimes toward) the palm to brush the string or strings down or up. Rarely used for melody, this approach is often used for the second (off) beat in a three or four note pattern, and gives the tune or song a clawhammer sound with plucked notes on the melody.

Two-finger performers also varied the direction of their picking, though it is uncommon to find first or second generation performers using both up-picking (plucking the string toward the upper side of the banjo) and down-picking (using the fingernail to play the string with a downward motion, similar to a brush stroke).

Two-finger is unique in that, first, performers almost always only use the thumb and forefinger to play it. While it can be played with or without finger picks, the sound created by this approach is generally more delicate than clawhammer, often more melodic than other styles, and usually less driving than “three-finger” style banjo playing. The character of the two-finger banjo style is pleasant, personal, takes full advantage of the best tones available from a banjo: Clear ringing notes that include overtones not usually heard over the percussive and noisy rhythm of clawhammer-style banjo or the three-finger attack of bluegrass banjo. It also has a very engaging draw, recognizable by the passion and inspiration that players have for it.

## **Whose Two Fingers?**

A handful of popular banjo players have been known to perform two-finger style. Although more well-known for his bluegrass playing, Wade Mainer utilized multiple styles in his banjo performance, including two-finger. Mainer was a well-known bandleader, and played banjo in his brother's band, J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers for a few years before forming his own group, Sons of the Mountaineers. In both his early and later years, Mainer's performances included significant number of two-finger banjo songs and tunes.

Will Keys was an East Tennessee native considered by many to be the most prominent two-finger style player. He started out learning two-finger style banjo, but switched to three-finger, bluegrass style in the 40's after it was popularized on the radio and in recorded music by Earl Scruggs. In the 70's, however, he began playing two-finger again, and started showing, placing, and winning old time banjo contests with his style, including the Clawhammer Banjo Competition held at the Old Fiddlers' Convention in Galax, Virginia. After appearing on a June Appal Records album with other old time banjo players, he performed that style almost exclusively until his death in 2005. Keys was featured on a tour titled "Masters of the Banjo" in 1993, and he was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1996.

Keys' style was unique in that he regularly used both thumb-led and finger-led melodies, but what really set his playing apart from other banjo players was the number of notes he played per bar. While most other performers accompany the melody with a pattern not unlike clawhammer rhythm, which gives a galloping or loping feel to the music (depending on tempo) by putting a rest on every second or fourth eighth note, in the majority of Keys' recorded music he generally filled every bar with 8th notes. This wall of sound can be both beautiful and driving,

and has been described as the “East Tennessee Style”—it is rare to find a banjo player using this kind of pattern if he hasn’t studied Will Keys’ playing.

On the other end of the style spectrum is Ed Teague, a north Georgian two-finger player. Teague was also a very melodic player, but in contrast to Keys, Teague often played *only* the melody; he regularly used a limited number of accompaniment notes when he was performing tunes, and often used only his forefinger to play distinct melody lines, or would incorporate a downward brush stroke (again, reminiscent of clawhammer banjo playing). From a discussion forum at BanjoHangout.org:

This particular pattern -pick up with index, brush down with middle then thumb note on 5th string - is often called Seeger Style because it was popularized by Pete Seeger, it being the first thing he teaches in his How to Play the Five String Banjo book. Mr. Teague... [does] it a little differently than Pete though, in that he seems to keep a couple of fingers anchored to the head throughout. Seeger does it with his hand in the clawhammer position with no fingers anchored when he's using the downward brush as part of the picking pattern, with the first note being picked up, instead of down like in clawhammer. However, when doing index or thumb lead two-finger picking without that brush inserted, Seeger anchors his fingers on the head just like Teague does. (1)

Teague also brushed up with his finger as well as down, which is a technique developed by other banjo players of all styles, perhaps influenced by the adoption of the use of fingerpicks, which make down-stroking difficult.

In 1981, Alice Gerrard took numerous photos and recorded several tapes of old time music in Roan Mountain, Tennessee that featured members of the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers (Gerrard). Bill Birchfield is a multi-instrumentalist in the family band, and I had a chance to see him perform at the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention in June, 2012. His two-finger style playing includes both finger-led and thumb-led melodies, often in the same song, as is common with some players, including Will Keys. Unlike Keys, however, Birchfield uses the brush stroke liberally to provide dynamic accents to his tunes. Birchfield's approach to playing the banjo is very unique among instrumentalists—he plays banjo left-handed, fretting the strings as one might on a mountain dulcimer, but the instrument is set up and strung as for a right handed player. Melodies on the higher strings are actually under Birchfield's thumb (which creates a challenge for an audio transcriber).



**Image 1. Bill Birchfield**

I know that field recordings of two-finger players exist in library archives at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the Smithsonian Folklife Institute in Washington, D.C., and in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University's Sherrod Library. In 1978, Dr. Richard Blaustein made a series of field recordings of the Payne brothers—fiddler Loyd Payne and banjoist George Payne—which are stored in his personal collection, and which he shared with me. George Payne's two-finger style version of "Lost All My Money," recorded in Jonesborough, Tennessee on December 26<sup>th</sup> of that year, has the "galloping" feel, where the second 8<sup>th</sup> note in a 4-note series is skipped. In fact, Payne's style on this song incorporates the "double thumb" technique which is often used in clawhammer, and except for the clearly plucked finger-led melody (and clearly documented field notes), the performance sounds very much like clawhammer style.

In addition to Mainer, Keys, Teague, Seeger, Boggs, Birchfield, and Payne, other banjo players that played two-finger styles either regularly or at points during their career include Bascom Lunsford, A.C. Overton, Art Rosenbaum, Marvin Gaster, Ralph Stanley, and Gail Gillespie, a banjo player and historian from North Carolina. Gail introduced me to old time fiddler Joseph Decosimo, a professor at East Tennessee State University, who, in addition to fiddle, plays multiple styles of banjo. He released an album of old time music in 2011 titled *Sequatchie Valley*, and included a version of the song "I'm Troubled" in two-finger style with guitar accompaniment.

Dr. Richard Hood, well known in the world of bluegrass for his driving three finger banjo style, often plays two-finger style banjo with other old time musicians in jams, and has posted a number of videos to YouTube. After many years playing bluegrass style, three-finger banjo, Hood recorded two CDs on two-finger, and played two-finger style all through the 90s with a

group called “Bristol Brothers” and for a short time with a dance band, Shubb and the Butter Beans, alongside Deb Clifford. “Uncle Will” is on the first Bristol Brothers’ CD, *Old Style*, which was released in 1993.

Hood, who is Will Keys’ nephew, prefers to play in Keys’ driving style, while Decosimo’s approach on songs like “I’m Troubled” is more relaxed and loping. Recently, I approached both performers and asked them to show how they would approach an old time song like “Old Molly Hare”—the song appears on Ed Teague’s album, *Pretty Little Gal with the Bright Blue Eye*, and is a medium-slow tempo piece. Though they utilize the same melody, Hood and Decosimo worked up different versions of the tune; Hood’s drives, Decosimo’s lopes. When asked to contrast their versions, they both say that their “feel” seems to serve the song best, and is more pleasant to their ear. This perspective seems to inform their approach to all of their material.

In online forums, at festivals, and in conversation with my interviewees I found much discussion about North Georgia style versus East Tennessee style, as well as some identification of characteristics of Piedmont and Northern Carolina banjo styles. In a general sense, one can point to a musician—Will Keys, for example—and say that he is the anchor of a regional style; in Keys’ case, it’s the East Tennessee style. In fact, I approached the research of these old time banjo players with a goal of identifying the regional distinction between the styles, but upon tracing the roots of these different approaches, I heard a common refrain from each musician that plays two-finger banjo: “I learned to play it how it sounded good to me.” Boggs was recorded stating:

I heard this fellow play the banjo ... I said to myself, I want to learn  
how to play the banjo kinda like that fellow does. I don't want to



play like my sister and brother. I am gonna learn just how to pick  
with my fingers. (O'Connell 6)

Ed Teague had no banjo instruction when he was learning—he says I “worked it out for myself” (Teague interview). He listened to the melody being played by the fiddle, or sung by a vocalist, and assembled the melody and accompaniment on his banjo in a way that was pleasing to him.

I am reminded of Fine's essay on self taught artists, and that there is something more important than their differences that these disparate players have in common. Fine quotes an art curator, who recognizes that “the singular note consistently sounded in the twentieth century has been the persistence of the individual, even when drawing upon convention, tradition, or heritage. Perhaps the strongest bond shared by these artists is the fulfillment of their creative impulses through a process that developed outside of the artworld” (Fine 160).

The process to which she refers—the simple, internal desire to make art—is one I repeatedly heard described in my research. It is evident that despite historian, folklorist, and increasingly, music producers and consumers', need to categorize music-making, music performance choices of instrument, music, venue, partners, or style are very individual and personal. This conflicts with desire by many to classify their music-making as “authentic.” Codified definitions of musical styles that leverage regional connections, lineage, or ancestry in an effort to demonstrate authenticity are often motivated, at the very least, by commercial gain or notoriety. Peterson writes, “The word [authenticity] is not invoked unless the attribute is contested” (205). It is not my intent to discuss claims of authenticity or comment on Peterson's definitions of authenticity (except to note that his definitions are incomplete); but as folklorist and old-time musician Richard Blaustein writes, “if folklorists are concerned with being good ethnographers, or social and cultural historians, or something other than proponents of a

particularly convoluted form of elitism that perceives itself as populism, then they need to abandon their historic quest for the authentic and concern themselves with the actual” (271).

It is true that even self-taught, first generation, performing (“actual”) musicians—in any form of music or art—can get caught up in the authenticity argument. “Those with personal or institutional interests,” writes Fine, “artists, critics, or grassroots community activists - may strategically appeal to the authenticity inherent in self-taught art to validate their position” (158). In fact, revered folk revivalist Alan Lomax deliberately pursued his song-catching in areas where he hoped the musicians had “not been contaminated by radio, not so much to document a tradition before it faded away, but to demonstrate that there were still cultural forms not contaminated by radio” (Filene 56).

Any discussion of authenticity and credibility claims would be fraught with issues, and the material debates are already in print (see Peterson, Blaustein, etc.); there is certainly substantial room for discussion and disagreement. Fine says that at its root, authenticity “refers to the recognition of difference” (155). It is not the subject of my research to make a case for or against two-finger banjo’s authenticity, however it could be recognized. Some of the nuances involved in these discussions can be important, however. It is true, for example, that oral or recorded material, instruments, and language are all tools musicians use to construct their music performance, and that certain components of music in one region, genre, or time period are hard to translate into another. This “difference” can be inspirational, and a source of pride of place (or time, or style)—but it can also be limiting.

In *"America is all around here": An ethnography of Bluegrass music in the contemporary Czech Republic*, Lee Bidgood revealed some struggles that a population may encounter when trying to adopt the music of another population that is geographically and ethnically distant (141,

153). In classroom discussion, Richard Cifersky, a Czech banjo player, described the difficulties of foreign language and the challenges of understanding cultural themes. These handicaps didn't prevent artists from performing music of another culture, but they did frustrate their desire to replicate the sounds that they hear. It seems, however, that the Czech peoples described in Bidgood's research don't make any claims of authenticity or ownership—just that they love the music, love to play it, and in several cases, recognize the limitations imposed by their cultural and genetic upbringing to reproduce it as a true copy of the original (which is one definition of authenticity, according to Peterson). They don't appear to have the raging debates about the music being authentic. They do appear to have developed a culture around the music, and traditions of performance that blend with pre-existing traditions of performance of other kinds of music.

In another example, a study of Scottish music reveals the similarity between the lyrical quality of 18<sup>th</sup> century fiddle melodies and the rhythm and meter of Gaelic speech. Obviously, ethnic and cultural factors have a huge influence in the development of music and style, in more ways than merely lyrical and thematic content—in the same way that Cifersky described the inherent cultural understanding Americans have when learning bluegrass music. Bruno Nettl, an ethnomusicologist, recognized this conflict; that the influence of culture and locale *do* play such an important role in the development of art and music. He writes, “If the fieldworker wishes to change from outsider to something approaching insider identity, participation seems the most logical route” (156). He also describes his experience with learning the music of another culture:

Acquiring native musical understanding is not easy. I was  
about to leave my lesson of Persian music in the spacious old  
house in south Teheran when my teacher suddenly fixed me with

his forefinger: “You will never understand this music. There are things that every Persian on the street understands instinctively which you will never understand, no matter how hard you try.” Startled, but still knowing what he meant, I blurted out, “I don't really expect to understand it that way, I am just trying to figure out how it is put together.”

“Oh, well, that is something you can probably learn, but it's not very important" (Nettl 259).

Considering the refrain I previously indicated, “I learned to play it how it sounded good to me,” two-finger style seems to draw individuals who, like the Czechs that play bluegrass, have a goal to take something personal from the experience of playing the banjo, even if it's “not very important.” Reinforcing the need to understand the two-finger style of banjo playing, I pursued a personal engagement to make the experience whole. In the next section, I'll review my own experience with two-finger banjo.



## **Personal Reflection**

I'll never forget how fervently my high school biology teacher, Robert Miller, who played fiddle and banjo and led a local group called Posey Lake Akademy of Music, tried to dissuade me from making a career out of music. "The fun will be sucked out of it," Mr. Miller told me, "if you do it for a living" (Miller interview).

Instead, he advised, play it for the joy of it. He had a great community of friends that he played music for and with (including my mother), and he didn't perform for a living, though his group had the occasional paid gig. He was extremely passionate about music.

But by the time I was 16 years old I was working regularly in a variety band at local clubs, and I decided that I wanted music to be my vocation. I already knew I had a passion for it—I was very involved in my high school bands and choirs, and I regularly took singing roles in school and community theater performances. But the cool music was rock, and a musician could gain accolades and get paid for playing it, so I gravitated toward playing rock music. My career as a rock musician lasted about 8 years, but what I find interesting today, looking back, was how little I practiced the music I performed. Instead, I spent my available time working up folk songs that had no relationship to the music I was playing in professional bands. My vocation had not turned out to be my passion, and I eventually stopped playing rock music.

In 2010 I moved to Johnson City to attend East Tennessee State University and pursue a degree from the Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies program. The classes had been available to students for decades, but the undergraduate degree was just being launched. I took Bluegrass History I from Dr. Hood, and it was at an impromptu jam he hosted that I first heard two-finger banjo playing, and in 2011 I asked him to perform in the studio for another class project. He recorded four songs for my class work, and encouraged me to find other players of

the style to record. He also showed me how to play the style, and in October 2012 I bought a banjo. I had been recommended to Bernunzio Uptown Music, a brick and mortar business in Rochester, New York that also has an online store. I had reviewed their inventory a number of times over the course of the year, drooling over their selection of 5-string open-back “old time” banjos. Makers like A.C. Fairbanks, Eastman, Lyon and Healy, S.S. Stewart and Cole had become familiar, and model names like Whyte Laydie, Regent, Professional, and Orchestra became part of my lexicon.

When I finally made the decision to purchase one, I contacted Dr. Hood and asked for advice on purchasing online. We reviewed the available banjos, and finally settled on a George C. Dobson “Matchless” as the most likely candidate to use for two-finger style. Hood was clear about a couple of points: ordering online of a high dollar instrument is a crapshoot, but reputable companies like Bernunzio have a fair return and refund policy. The Matchless was \$899.00, which was a great price for an instrument approximately 130 years old in great shape. Here are the specs for the banjo, and the listing from Bernunzio’s website:

Geo. C Dobson Matchless

Year: circa 1880s

Condition: Very Good +



**Image 2. Dobson Matchless Banjo**

This is a very interesting Dobson with mahogany neck and ornate pearl inlays including a crescent moon and cherub playing a horn.

The long peghead is at an extreme angle back from the nut and set up with Champion tuners. The heavy, 11 inch rim is fitted with good, original hardware and carved dowel stick, Abel tailpiece and Nylgut® strings. (1)

The banjo is beautiful, and is extremely exciting to play. When it arrived, I immediately learned the song “Groundhog” from Art Rosenbaum’s book, Old Time Mountain Banjo, but incorporated pinches and slides that I’d seen performed. I also changed some of the melody notes he had tabbed for the banjo so that I could sing along and the vocal and picking would be in harmony (which I later discovered is a non-traditional approach to playing two-finger banjo; performers and transcribers rarely deviate from the melody when working up a song).

Hood taught me a song that is great for learning the right hand pattern for two-finger picking. The song was written by him, is called “Uncle Will,” and it incorporates both finger- and thumb-led picking. It is played in normal G tuning, starts with a C chord shape and is finger-led at the beginning. Notated examples follow:



Figure 1. Traditional Notation



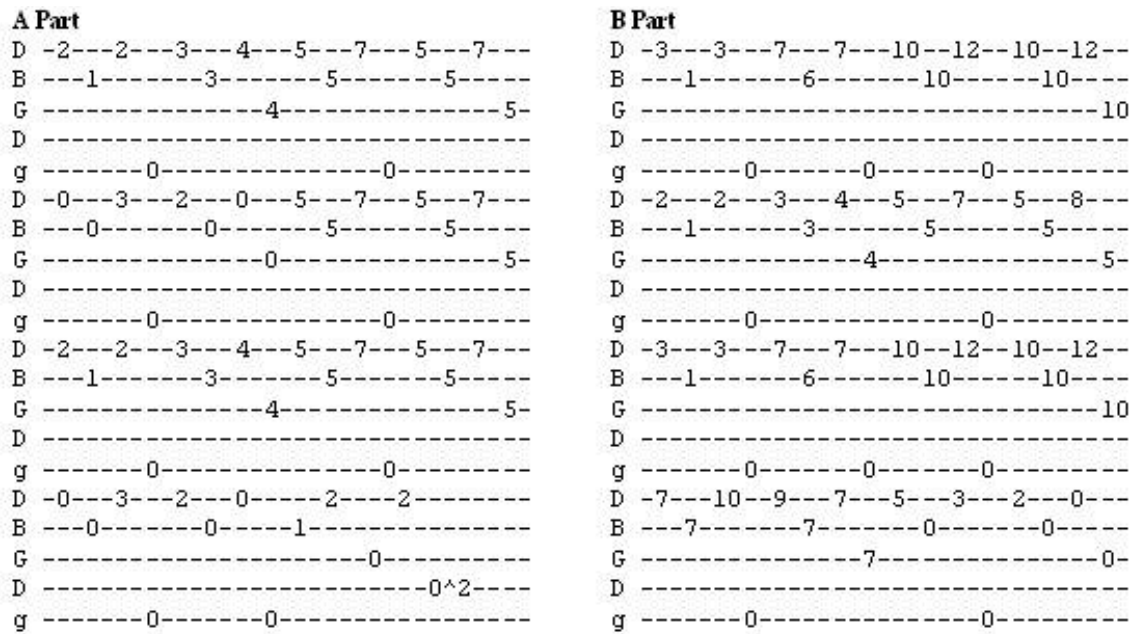


Figure 2. Tablature

In Jeff Titon's essay on bi-musicality, he writes:

Obviously, the main thing that an ethnographic fieldworker-  
whether ethnomusicologist, anthropologist, or folklorist-tries to  
learn from his or her informants is information, differences that  
make a difference. For years, ethnographers working in the fields  
of folklife studies, anthropology, and ethnomusicology thought of  
their task as collecting information, first in the form of texts, later  
in the form of texts and contexts, still later in the form of  
professional information on performance. (289-90)

My experience with two-finger banjo continues to be one of the most exciting endeavors  
I've ever undertaken, and I find myself picking up the banjo and practicing more often than I  
ever did with any other instrument or style of music. I perform on upright bass regularly in a

bluegrass group, but it won't be long before the number of practice hours I've spent on the banjo over the past year eclipse the total practice hours I've spent on the bass in the past two decades.

I'm not developing a repertoire of tunes and songs with the goal of performing them for others, although I have performed exactly twice as part of research presentations. I enjoy working out fiddle tunes with familiar melodies, such as "Old Molly Hare," listening to recordings and trying to figure out if the performer is using a thumb-led melody style or not, and even writing melodies to play in two-finger style.

Christopher Small writes:

In that real world where people make and listen to music, in concert halls and suburban drawing rooms, in slum bedrooms and political rallies, in supermarkets and churches, in record stores and temples, fields and nightclubs, discos and palaces, stadiums and hotel elevators, it is performance that is central to the experience of music. There can be no music apart from performance, whether it's live or on record. (2)

Collecting valid, insightful information on music-making, or "musicking"<sup>2</sup>, as Small identifies it, can be tricky business if the informant (performer) is also the researcher! However, when he writes "differences that make a difference," Titon is pointing to the development of the methodology of folklife studies, indicating that music researchers are learning to recognize the value of documenting the whole experience of musicking. Small is describing a conundrum from the classical music genre, where the definition of music starts with the documented work, and

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Small developed the term "musicking" as the present participle of "to music," which he defines as "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance." In this context, this activity includes the performer or performers, listeners (who may also be performers), dancers, soundmen, and any others whose activities affect the nature of the musical performance (Small 3).

doesn't include the actual playing of a piece. In the two-finger banjo style I have found passion for performance and community that inspires continued study—in pursuit of an understanding of these elements through the lens of old time music. Perhaps part of the draw is that it is not ubiquitous, that the airwaves and record stores are not saturated with the music, or that the known performers are more than happy to make room in the genre for others to fit and experience the style. The main draw that I find in playing two-finger style—or the one that finds me—is the individual joy I get in making music that is both simple and complex, driving and restrained, dynamic and subtle. In Amy Wooley's dissertation on the Appalachian string band revival she interviews Michael Ismerio, an old time musician currently living in Asheville. Wooley quotes him:

It's our own little secret.... Like, I know about it and these people know about it, but the guy on NBC doesn't know about it. We're human--we all want to be part of something that everyone's not a part of. We want to be individuals. (243)

Wooley's research into the old time revival of the 1990's reveals that its participants have a common "cynical rejection and distrust of the popular music industry;" whereas the old time revival in the 1970's was associated with the communal, back-to-the-land movement, at the end of the century revivalists were focused on abandoning previous music traditions and seeking out uncommodifiable traditions. They were more concerned with resisting commodification of musical expression, and keeping it among themselves. In fact, Wooley's "recipe" for a strong revival culture centers on a key tenant: Revival groups' continued "resistance to commodification and corruption is essential for the continuation of the movement or community" (281).

Jeff Titon also writes about his experience singing as a guest and researcher with Old Regular Baptists, and notes that he did not pick up their religious doctrine just because he shared a musical experience with them, but that it was, nonetheless, a very moving experience (296). A moving experience is exactly how I would describe what happens when I listen to and play two-finger banjo. Wooley also writes that “the one through thread [connecting all old time revivals] has been the search for a link to tradition and something at once human and sacred” (278). Like Titon, my experience with two-finger banjo is no less profound and spiritual than someone learning hymns from his grandmother as a child, and is woven from the revival thread that Wooley describes—it is sacred, unique, and personal.



## The Art of Music

Barbara Allen is a Scottish ballad that has been performed for generations in the United Kingdom and the United States. And while European ballads often find new lyrics and structures in the New World, among the variants that exist today of the song, the basic meaning, structure, images in the lyrics, and the melody generally remained unchanged. Perhaps one reason that Barbara Allen has endured in the same state for hundreds of years is that it has long been used in secondary school, where “it has entered the curriculum as the model of the ballad form” (Wilentz and Marcus 10).

At a post-wedding parking lot picking session, my brothers and I performed “Dear Sarah” by Scott Miller and the Commonwealth, a song we learned from their *Thus Always to Tyrants* CD. The lyric tells the story of a soldier fighting in the American Civil War, and his letters to the love of his life back home. At the end of the song, Miller sings the first verse of Barbara Allen (continuing a legacy of folk artists referencing old ballads, and giving it current context within regional history). A listener at our parking-lot picking session indicated that he had enjoyed our performance, but said, “That’s not how I know that song,” indicating his recognition of only the verse of Barbara Allen that Miller adds to the end. For him, the song was inauthentic.

Its regular publication, memorable melody, and inoffensive theme seem to have saved it from the natural folk process, and to the best of balladeers’ ability to determine it endures today nearly unchanged from the original, until Miller. His interpretation seems heretical to some. But while every song or tune has an author and an origination point, just as every musical performance style has a creator—whether we know them or not—music (and other art) certainly can belong to any culture or community where it is adopted, in whatever form they choose.

Because he died before his work was finished, song collector Francis Child—who is considered an authority on ballads from the UK—was unable to tell us whether he considered variants as valid as the primary work he identified, either in context or whether they stood on their own as art (Gower 80). There are enumerable factors that can be used to dismiss many variations as a random cost of the folk process, but many of these variations clearly point to sociological and cultural factors, and can be defined and traced—if not at the point of their modification, at least in hindsight with reflection on the changes. These songs and the changes incorporated are often representative of the politics, social mores, and attitudes of the performers and audiences, and can teach us an enormous number of cultural details.

A challenge to this idea is often heard at formal and informal picking sessions, genre-specific revivals, or in the classroom, where artists, performers, and scholars debate the authenticity of this version or that version of a song, citing such evidence as first known printing, first recording, first performance by a key cultural figure, or first performance with the “proper” instrumentation, melody, harmony, or lyrical content. These discussions have their value, as does the research behind them, in the discoveries made and shared and the sense of community that can develop. However, I think to dwell too much on these details misses a point that much of society has not over the years, and one which Michelle Kisliuk discusses in her article *A Special Kind of Courtesy: Action at a Bluegrass Festival Jam Session*; each community chooses its musicking norms and its definitions of credibility (146). As American folklorist Gordon Hall Gerould writes, there are an amazing variety of “good ballad variants.” The differences between the lyric texts are often due to the artistic efforts of the singer and folklorist who, while they often claim to be faithfully reproducing songs as they heard them, nonetheless create variants either accidentally or through deliberate intent which are often also good (Hall 21). Art

Rosenbaum, American folklorist and art scholar, goes further, stating that each performance, whether recorded or not, stands as a work of art presented by that artist at that moment in time, and can be appreciated as such (Rosenbaum interview).

James E. is a student at East Tennessee State University that takes lessons, performs with a professional group, and studies old recordings. He also jams with friends just for the opportunity to play old time music. Recently, he worked up a version of Black-Eyed Suzie in a two-finger banjo style, simply for the joy of the task. James' joy comes from this understanding that music is art; music performance is art. It is possible that art is art for its own sake and needs no further definition except the engagement of the music-maker, and as he desires, the engagement of his community (Frisch 88).

Filene expands with an observation about Pete Seeger:

Seeger is not and never was authentic. Even in his jeans and holding his banjo, he looks more like a town selectman than a hillbilly. Performing at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, he didn't pretend the auditorium was a juke joint or a barn dance. It was the here and now that mattered to him ... Seeger's own voice is so tattered he can only generate a warbly whisper, but through gesture and sheer will he [can lead] a crowd of four hundred in spirited song. This is the side of Seeger that has staying power— his sheer joy at the process of building, sharing, tweaking and twanging the elements of vernacular song. Whatever form this music takes, Seeger seemed to be demonstrating, it just has to be part of the world we're making. (67)



Christopher Small echoes him exactly, stating that by “experiencing the relationships of [a musical] performance in all their complexity we are experiencing those of the wider world as we conceive them to be” (9). Small and Frisch (whose study of the teaching of old time fiddle also leads to some very eye-opening conclusions about the involvement of the audience in musicking) both recognize the importance of the community surrounding the individual music maker. I know other players that practice in solitude, as I often do. I know players that rarely perform in front of an audience—as is also my choice with two-finger banjo. However, the lessons, the discussions, the community give us an opportunity to share our thoughts about our passion, revel in others’ performances or discoveries, and celebrate the uncommodifiable nature of the art form.

B. A. Botkin reminds us that folklore “is not something far away and long ago, but real and living among us” (Filene 57). Two-finger banjo musicking is both personal and communal, and the healthiest way to consider that concept is to root oneself in the joy of music—and other art—making. Any discussion of authenticity can begin with frameworks and definitions and categories; at the end of the day, the real benefit of the conversation is, ultimately, to understand that authenticity and credibility are about finding meaning by engaging with your community and connecting yourself to your art.

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## Resources

### Internet Resources

Old Time Music Home Page, <http://www.oldtimemusic.com>

Banjo Hangout, Old Time Style Forums, <http://banjohangout.org>

Bernunzio Uptown Music, <http://bernunzio.com>

Rob MacKillop Classic Banjo Page, <http://classicbanjorm.com>

Richard Hood YouTube Channel, <http://www.youtube.com/user/tighrow>

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### Videos

Keys, Will. *Old Time Banjo from Blackley Creek*. Spring Fed, 2011. DVD.

Roan Mountain Hilltoppers. *The Field Recorders Collective*, 2007. DVD

### Audio Samples

Audio samples of songs referenced are available online via the eThesis server at ETSU's Sherrod Library.

